pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

# Viral Hepatitis C Fact Sheet for TEENS
# Prevention, Early Diagnosis and Treatment is Critical!!!

## What is hepatitis?

Inflammation of the liver is known as "hepatitis." There are many causes of hepatitis; usually, in teens it is caused by a viral infection. Hepatitis A, B, and C are three viruses that can cause hepatitis. There are vaccines that prevent hepatitis A and B infection, but there is no vaccine currently available that protects against hepatitis C.

## What does the hepatitis C virus do?

When the hepatitis C virus enters a person's body, it makes its way to a healthy cell in the liver. Once inside the cell, the virus produces copies of itself eventually infecting other healthy liver cells. A virus-infected liver cell can no longer properly do its job of cleansing the body of poisons/toxins. About 20 percent of the time, an infected person succeeds in fighting off the virus, but that means 80 percent of infected people develop long-term (also called chronic) hepatitis C infection.

It usually takes years for the hepatitis C virus to damage enough liver cells for a person to get sick. Until that happens, the infected person may feel fine, but the virus is silently reproducing itself and destroying liver cells. During this time, the person is contagious, which means he or she is able to spread the disease to others.

## How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C infection isn't like a cold or the flu. A person does not get hepatitis C by touching, kissing or being in the same room with someone who has hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is passed from person to person through blood or other body fluids. Sometimes during pregnancy, the virus can pass to the unborn child.

People are most often exposed to hepatitis C by engaging in risky behaviors such as:

- Injecting drugs with a used needle or snorting drugs with a used straw;
- Sharing personal items like razors, toothbrushes, etc;
- Unprotected sexual activity; and
- Getting a tattoo or body piercing with tools or ink contaminated with the virus.

It is important to know that needles, razors, tattoo equipment (including ink), etc. can transmit hepatitis C even if they look clean. Hepatitis C can be spread by amounts of blood too small to be seen. Even normal washing may not get rid of microscopic bits of blood.

## Can hepatitis C be prevented?

At this time, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection. However, you can protect yourself by avoiding risky behaviors.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

Most people with hepatitis C do not experience symptoms for years. Eventually, infected persons may develop yellowing of the whites of the eyes and the skin (called "jaundice"), tiredness, nausea and lack of appetite. As the disease progresses, the belly may swell with fluid, the liver may fail entirely, and the person may need a liver transplant or may even die.

## How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

A person can be infected with hepatitis C without even knowing it. Testing is important for anyone who has ever engaged in any risky behaviors, such as using drugs, sharing personal items like razors and toothbrushes, having unprotected sex, or getting a tattoo or piercing from a parlor that doesn't properly sterilize their equipment or use separate inkwells for each customer. A blood test will show if a person is infected with the hepatitis C virus.

## How is hepatitis C treated?

There are medications which are able to treat some forms of hepatitis C. The best approach is to avoid high-risk behaviors, but, if exposed, the best chance for successful recovery is early diagnosis and treatment.

## Hope for a hepatitis C-free future

Maybe one day, a cure for hepatitis C infection will be found. Until then, the smartest thing to do is to know the facts and not put yourself at risk.

If you have questions about hepatitis C, talk to an adult you trust — a parent, doctor, school nurse or guidance counselor. Friends may not know all the right answers.

More information on hepatitis C is available at:

- Pennsylvania Department of Health, www.health.state.pa.us, in the section on diseases and conditions
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov